

THE REPORT@ROBERTLEOS.COM

February 2008
Volume III Issue 1

©2008 by Robert H. Leos, P.O. Box 92006, Austin, TX 78709-2006
Phone: 512-914-5998 Fax: 512-892-1781; <mailto:report@robertleos.com>

Dr. Jesús Francisco de la Teja

State Historian of Texas; President, Texas State Historical Association; Professor of History and Chair, History Department, Texas State University

By Robert H. Leos

Dr. Jesús Francisco de la Teja truly wears many hats. One is his position as history professor at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. Another is his position as Chair of the same department. Yet another is as President of the Texas State Historical Association, and yet another is the honorable position of serving as Texas State Historian.

Dr. de la Teja's career has included a unique combination of professional experiences that includes hands-on experience with historical documents as an assistant state archivist, scholarly work in academia including publications related to Cuban and Mexican history as well as in-depth studies of Colonial Latin America. In addition to his current teaching and administrative responsibilities at Texas State University, he spends a considerable amount of time speaking with groups about the importance of promoting the teaching of history and preserving the state's history.

Dr. de la Teja earned his B.A. from Seton Hall University with a major in political science and a minor in history. He also earned his master's degree from Seton Hall in history and came to The University of Texas at Austin to earn his Ph.D. in Colonial Latin American History. We spoke in his office at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. [rhl](#).



Continued on the next page

ROBERT LEOS: *How did you get to be the state historian? Were you appointed?*

DR. DE LA TEJA: It is a gubernatorial appointment. I am the inaugural state historian. A few years ago a group of people felt that the state needed someone who could promote the interests in teaching and preserving the state's history. In the 2005 legislative session, a bill was presented and passed that established the position of State Historian. The position is like the poet laureate or the state musician. It is a voluntary position and it is an honor.

ROBERT LEOS: *What are some of the responsibilities of the state historian?*

DR. DE LA TEJA: The responsibilities are essentially three-fold. The first is to promote Texas history education. The second is to advocate for the preservation of the state's historic heritage. Third, to be available to consult the governor and other state officials on matters historical. I have been actively involved in the first two of the three responsibilities.

ROBERT LEOS: *I understand that you were a guest speaker at the annual conference of the Texas Association of School Boards and Texas Association of School Administrators. What was your central message to those organizations?*

DR. DE LA TEJA: My primary message is that our population in the state is changing. The population that we have to educate is changing. Consequently, we must do a better job of educating the populations in our classrooms. And to do that we cannot stick to a story that is essentially a romantic, patriotic, very narrowly defined history of Texas.

Yesterday, I was speaking to a reporter from the *Rio Grande Guardian* about some of these same issues. I explained to her that it is not just about Latinos, Mexican Americans, or African Americans. Texas history is also about women. We have half the population of Texas that is not adequately represented in what is taught. I am

not just referring to the textbooks; I am referring to instruction, the way that history is presented to the public. This is an integral issue that I believe is an important one. Part of what history is supposed to do at the K-12 level is to be a part of civics. It is supposed to prepare you to be a good citizen of the state and of the nation. But if we're not connecting with the students and if we're not telling them the history that's relevant to them, then there's less likelihood that they're going to feel connected to this society and be willing to do the things that good citizens should be doing.

Last Friday, I was the guest of honor at a reception at the state library. This gave me an opportunity to speak about the importance of preserving the state's archival heritage, its documentary heritage. This is another aspect of my position as state historian.

ROBERT LEOS: *Because of your interest in how Texas history is presented to students, will you be involved in the next round of revisions to the Texas social studies curriculum?*

DR. DE LA TEJA: Actually, the original idea was that I would be the second state historian. The reason for that is that my term would be closer to the next adoption of instructional materials for history. I would serve in the middle of the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills-the curriculum standards in Texas) revision. I would be involved in providing some direction to what should be in the new instructional materials. It did not work out that way and I ended up being the first state historian rather than the second. Therefore, I am a bit early in the process but it gives me the opportunity to start talking to groups that are going to be at the table. My message will be the same message: we have to do a better job of including other groups in the classroom that have been left out of the story. In addition, we must do a better job of providing teachers with the tools that

Continued on the next page

they can use to address populations that are not being properly served in instruction now.

ROBERT LEOS: *How long is your appointment as state historian?*

DR. DE LA TEJA: It is a two-year appointment but I will serve until my successor is sworn in. It may be two years; it may be a little longer. It depends on how long it takes to find the next individual. This is a dual nomination. The legislation calls for the Texas State Historical Association and the Texas Historical Commission to nominate the individual and present him or her to the governor. If the two organizations do not agree on the nominee, then they each nominate someone and the governor makes the decision.

ROBERT LEOS: *How did you develop such an interest in history?*

DR. DE LA TEJA: History has always fascinated me. Normally, people do not acquire a historical interest until much later in life, usually around age 40 or so. I have always liked history. When I went to college, however, I was particularly interested in a career in the state department, something in the area of international affairs. As a result, my undergraduate degree was in political science with a minor in history. By the time I was a junior, however, I knew that what I wanted to do was what I am doing now. I always finish what I start, so I finished my political science degree. I then switched over to history and earned a master's degree in history. What brought me to Texas was the Ph.D. program in history at The University of Texas at Austin.

ROBERT LEOS: *Your background also includes working with novelist James Michener. Tell us how that came about.*

DR. DE LA TEJA: James Michener was coming to Texas at the invitation of Governor Bill Clements to write his novel, *Texas*. He was installed in the history department at the university and the history department was charged with providing him with a

couple of research assistants. I ended up being one of those research assistants. That research assistant position is what gave me the interest in Texas history. Before that, I was interested in Mexican history, in Cuban history and the Latin American wars of independence. But working for James Michener for two years, I retooled so that I could do the work in Texas history, colonial Texas history, the Bexar archives and colonial San Antonio. Colonial San Antonio became my dissertation, and I was drawn deeper and deeper into Texas history.

Part of my research was at the Texas General Land Office. A few months later, the General Land Office contacted me because they knew that I could read and understand the Spanish language records. They offered me a job as an assistant archivist. I worked there for six years. I like to tell people that the Texas General Land Office is where I really learned Texas his-



“My message will be the same message: we have to do a better job of including other groups in the classroom that have been left out of the story. In addition, we must do a better job of providing teachers with the tools that they can use to address populations that are not being properly served in instruction now.”

Continued on the next page

tory because it was hands-on.

ROBERT LEOS: *In addition to your academic career, you have also had the opportunity to be involved in the planning of the Texas State History Museum in Austin. What were some of your responsibilities in that role?*

DR. DE LA TEJA: I began working on the museum at the beginning of 1999, in the original planning of the content. I stayed until they were ready to start creating the panels and putting up the exhibits. I was involved in the development of the themes and the storylines as part of what was called a content development team. One of the things we tried to do is to make sure that we included people who have contributed to the state's history so that kids, no matter what color, what ethnic group, could find some positive things about their own group in the museum.

ROBERT LEOS: *You wrote an op-ed piece for the Austin American Statesman newspaper in November 2007 that stressed the importance of technology and the Internet as a resource for teachers and students in the teaching of history. Could you elaborate a bit on your ideas for improving instruction?*

DR. DE LA TEJA: It is broader than just the textbook. In the *Handbook of Texas Online*, you can find 15,000 to 16,000 entries related to Mexican Americans. There is no way a textbook can do all that. Teachers, students, and parents have resources beyond what is in the textbook. I think the last round of textbooks was much better than the previous round and I am sure that the next round will be better, but you have a wealth of material online that can enrich the experience. You cannot just rely on a textbook for teaching today's students. Let me give you an example. We have a large and growing population of Asian Americans in the state. How much will you find about Asian Americans in the textbooks? It is not the textbook's fault, especially when the textbooks were adopted five years ago and will be in use for another five or six years. You have to find alternatives to the textbooks. Raising consciousness is the other way I like to describe my job. Textbook publishers respond to the rules and we have to raise the consciousness of the legislature and the board members. Publishers and producers must have more latitude in being more creative in order to meet the needs of more students. That is really the bottom line. That is where we want to be at the end of the day. We need to have new resources.



“One of the things we tried to do is to make sure that we included people who have contributed to the state's history so that kids, no matter what color, what ethnic group, could find some positive things about their own group in the museum.”

Dr. de la Teja referring to his role in planning the content for the Texas State History Museum, pictured at left.
